

# ROOST BUSTING

Every fall, before, during or after the season, Game and Fish waterfowl biologists get input from hunters. This input is sometimes related to concerns about “roost busting” by duck or goose hunters.

Loosely defined, roost busting is a term some hunters use to describe the hunting or other disturbance of ducks or geese on their water roost so the birds move somewhere else, thereby reducing hunting opportunities in harvested crop fields, or other wetlands near the roosting area.

Sometimes the disturbance is simply other hunters motoring a duck boat to a hunting spot somewhere in the roost water, perhaps in the dark without knowledge that ducks or geese were using the area as a roost.

Sometimes it's boat hunters who know full well the area they are hunting has many birds on it, but the water is either their only available place to hunt, or they prefer over-water hunting, a waterfowling tradition.

It can also be hunters walking long distances to jump shoot or hunt shorelines where birds are roosting, or perhaps even upland game hunters whose shooting too close to ducks or geese on the water scares the birds away.

Sometimes it's anglers motoring out to chase a rumor of a hot fall bite.

Here's an excerpt from one e-mail sent to the Game and Fish Department last year:

*“...we've got a big problem in the area where we are trying to hunt and that is roost busting by the nonresidents. I'm not against nonresidents ... I'm more than willing to share our resources, but ... when they bust up that roost, the birds are gone and could have been hunted for several days by everyone, not just me.... Please discourage this type of 'hunting' or ban it altogether.”*

Field hunting for waterfowl has existed in some form in North Dakota since not long after the first plowshare of native prairie sod was turned over for the planting of crops. After large national wildlife refuges were created in North Dakota in the 1930s, field hunting for geese started to become more popular, as birds discovered these large water areas where they could rest during the day undisturbed.

Hunters caught on to the morning and evening feeding patterns. As geese became more plentiful in the 1950s, more people began to hunt them and during this time the Game and Fish Department began testing half-day shooting hours as a way to further protect geese to keep them in an area for a longer period of time.

In an effort to develop more areas to protect geese where they were roosting or resting, and therefore create more localized field hunting opportunities, Game and Fish in 1959 created its first two waterfowl rest

areas in Barnes County.

A waterfowl rest area is basically a large water area around which adjacent landowners have agreed to restrict waterfowl hunting – even to the landowners themselves. There is no waterfowl hunting on the water, on the shoreline, or inland for a certain distance so concentrations of ducks and geese are not disturbed while they are on the water or flying in or out near the water.

Some WRAs are closed to all types of hunting, some allow upland or big game hunting.

Establishment of these areas is typically requested by local wildlife clubs or landowners, and the boundaries are usually set so birds that use the rest area for roosting are likely to fly out of it for feeding.

The WRA program has steadily declined in the last decade, peaking at 55 in 1997, and falling to just 20 this year, with a few of them closed only to waterfowl hunting.

A big reason this gradual reduction has occurred is that some WRA requests came from people who wanted to establish their own private hunting reserve – that is the water gets posted, and then access to nearby fields is restricted, or only allowed to a privileged few.

Other WRAs have been eliminated as land changes hands and new owners want to hunt waterfowl on their property.

Outside of national wildlife refuges, federal easement refuges and waterfowl rest areas that serve as protected roosting areas, North Dakota has thousands of wetlands, marshes and lakes that hold waterfowl in the fall. Many of these are hunted frequently, some are not, whether it's because of relative inaccessibility, landowner preference, or just coincidence.

With nearly 60,000 resident and nonresident waterfowl hunters looking for opportunities, however, it's a rare concentration of birds, whether geese or ducks, that does not get noticed at some point. If ducks or geese are on the water, and they are accessible, someone will eventually try to hunt them there.

It's a stereotype that nonresidents are primarily boat hunters and North Dakota residents are primarily field hunters. It's not always nonresidents who are perceived as “roost busters,” and it's not always North Dakota residents who are the ones voicing their concerns.

Rather, it's simply hunters who choose one method of hunting over another for a variety of reasons, which could include:

- Personal preference.
- Lack of access to fields while water may be available to public.
- An opportunity that is too good to pass up.

- Ability to haul decoys deep into the marsh by foot.
- Type of species available or desired.
- Quality or type of hunting.

In some situations, inadvertent disturbance of ducks or geese on the water is unavoidable. Bluebill or other diver hunting is almost exclusively an over-water endeavor, with

boats often needed to get to and from hunting areas or to pick up decoys. Not all mallards feed exclusively in fields, either. Hunters who want to shoot ducks other than mallards or pintails need to hunt over water.

Over-water duck hunters who aren't specifically

after geese are usually excited to have a chance to bag a goose that randomly flies within range. Some duck hunters bring along a few floating goose decoys to increase the odds of random geese swinging by to take a look, or to use simply as confidence decoys.

And some hunters specifically pursue geese over water, on sandbars on the Missouri River south of Washburn (the area from two miles southeast of Washburn north to Garrison Dam is closed to goose hunting from shore to shore), along Lake Sakakawea, and anywhere else where bare points or islands might attract loafing birds.

Where the term roost busting arises is largely related to scale. Few field hunters would complain about water hunters setting up where maybe a few dozen birds have established a resting pattern. Not many field hunters would focus their efforts in such areas with low bird concentrations anyway.

On the other hand, when a body of water that is not closed to hunting attracts hundreds or thousands of birds, and they have been around for a few days and they are supplying numerous field hunting opportunities in the surrounding area, it's not unreasonable for field hunters to ask for some consideration from other

hunters who might have the resources to try to hunt the water.

Then again, it depends on the circumstances.

If it's youngsters going out after school, perhaps to try to jump-shoot birds, the Game and Fish Department doesn't want to discourage that style of hunting, nor should anyone try to make hunters feel bad about it.

If it's mid-November and a season-ending cold front is on the way, the water hunters might approach the situation differently than if it was mid-October and the forecast was for another week of stable weather.

Also, wetlands that hold large concentrations of birds may continue to do so even when hunted. This is

especially true for ducks if hunters allow large flocks to use the wetland during the middle of the day.

The bottom line from the Game and Fish Department perspective is that regulating the variables that lead to charges of roost busting would mean further complicating regulations to ask some hunters to give up legitimate opportunities, sometimes on public land or waters, so that they would not interfere with the opportunity of someone else with access to a field that may be posted, to hunt the same birds.

North Dakota does have dozens of national wildlife refuges, easement refuges and state rest areas where hunting the water is not allowed. Individual landowners or groups of landowners can certainly choose on their own to not allow hunting access to water areas.

The question for this **Both Sides**, is whether "roost busting" is the straight-forward taboo that some hunters make it out to be?

What do you think?

*To pass along your comments, send us an e-mail at [ndgf@nd.gov](mailto:ndgf@nd.gov); call us at (701) 328-6300; or write North Dakota Game and Fish Department, 100 N. Bismarck Expressway, Bismarck, ND 58501.*



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